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BUSHFIRE FAILURE

Interview with Albert

Albert: The fire was now bearing down on our home. I became aware in that moment that what happened next would be the difference between life and death. As a father and a husband there's certain things that you would expect of yourself and I think in that moment I failed us all.

Celia: There are some life-changing moments that completely catch us off guard. We may regret the choices we make, but they don't have to hold us to that moment. I'm Celia Fielke, and this is messages of hope. My guest today, Albert, had to face the consequences of his choices as fire threatened his home and family.

It's hard to fully imagine what it must be like to be in the middle of a bushfire, unless you've been there. For Albert, this was the first time he'd been faced with the reality of an out of control bushfire. Albert, can you take me back to that day?

Albert: It was the 20th of December, holidays were happening but I think we were still tidying up at school. The principal had said "Don't come into school, it was going to be windy, 46 degrees, it's catastrophic." In the morning I was picking my son up from a sleep over. I dropped into the school to pick up my laptop and I grabbed my son. Even with all of the smoke, even with all of the sirens, even with all of the warnings, it was never evident to me that it was going to affect me personally. It was more "Gee, we wonder what's going on over there, you know."

And even coming home around midday it was difficult to get through. We didn't see flames but obviously there was lots of smoke and again sirens and so forth and police redirecting us. My wife who was working at the hospital that morning had been sent home. Her boss said, "The fires are significant now, they're a long way from us but it might be better for you to be at home." So, it was good to get home but neither of us expected what was it about to happen.

Celia: So what did you do at home?

Albert: So we got home. My daughter and my son and myself and my wife chose to watch a film. We love our watching films together. So we went into a room, we closed the blinds. It was a very hot day. We had the air conditioning running and we thought it would be fun to sit and watch a film of all things!

Celia: Well, you had a day off.

Albert: (laughter) Yes, we had a day off! It wasn't until perhaps half an hour into the movie when my daughter got up, left the room with the blinds down, went to the back sliding doors and then came back in and said, "Dad, there's a lot of smoke in the backyard."

I walked out and oblivious again to all the dangers I took some photos. The most stark photo was the one with my daughter against the sliding doors. The deck out the back was so filled with smoke, we couldn't see more than 10 meters outside our house!

Celia: So looking back now to that moment, what do you think about how the day unfolded?

Albert: That's part of something that I'm still trying to process 12 months down the track. How can a man who's in his fifties have a family on a property, with all of that smoke and all of those signs and not be a little more self-aware of the dangers that were coming our way?

Celia: So what was going through your mind then?

Albert: I know that the next 10 or 15 minutes, it was more a novel kind of thinking. I saw one fire down in the valley and it seemed probably seven, eight kilometres away. And you could see another fire burning to the west which was going to be the one that shocked the stuffing out of us. I would have thought it was 10 kilometres away. As I look back now I realise it was about a kilometre away!

Celia: Okay so initially you were quite curious about it rather than being frightened at this stage.

Albert: Yeah, taking photos, chatting with the family, "This looks serious for some people you know, there must be places that are burning."

Celia: Serious for other people you thought?

Albert: Serious for others. I went about a 100 to 150 meters up the road. The road wasn't burning but both sets of bushes on both sides of the road, about 200 meters in front of us were on fire. I think in the moment, again very novel, "My goodness our road is on fire!" So I've stopped the car and I started taking photos again. Just complete naivety! All of a sudden we could see flames bearing down on a home across the road. It was surreal. It was like watching a movie. I realised in that moment I need to get home and quick.

I'm talking a maximum of three minutes from the time I left to the time I drive back in. Now you could see a kilometre of flame in one line and it was right there. I mean at the point where I'd parked the car it was 200 meters away! By that time two things were clear. One was that the fire was coming for us. There's no out here. The second reality was that Joanna (my wife) was trying to get the pump started on the fire hoses. So I'm driving around taking photos, she was trying to get the pump on. So what troubles me is that I've left them.

So I've arrived home, she's trying to get the fire hoses started. She can't and I began to panic. We need to get in the car. We need to go. The most pressing thought in my mind was, I was responsible for killing my family. So on the one hand I was feeling this sense of overwhelming anger within myself but at the same moment I was moving into what needed to be done.

And this is the moment I am thankful to God that in the few minutes we had left to make our escape that there was a plan coming together. It wasn't a good one. It wasn't great. It wasn't brilliant but it was there.

So all the doors of the car were opened and I just needed four people and a dog and a cat. If I could tape the sounds of the next few moments, I'm sure my voice would have been raised. I had convinced Joanna to stop trying to fight the fire. Her instinct is we can beat this thing. My daughter was already in the back seat. The dog was in the car. My son had disappeared. Turned out Ben was inside the house looking for the cat. He couldn't find the cat and Ben wasn't going to leave without the cat. I had to physically remove him from the house. I remember screaming like I hadn't screamed in my life because of the realisation that the next few minutes were the difference between life and death.

Celia: So, with the fires at your house Albert, you know that you've got to get everyone out of there. But you also know in some ways that your choices have put you in this life/death moment. What's going through your mind?

Albert: I became aware in that moment that we could die. And that came about because of that naivety. I think that's where the tears come from and a little bit of the guilt that I think I've carried for a little while. But in that moment, the love that God gives you for your family takes over. So, in a sense God is acting in that moment. Not because I'm praying to him but because he's making me realise that the most precious things in my life are now in danger and I've just got to do what it takes to make sure they're safe. And in that vulnerable moment, realizing maybe I can't save them.

Once we were out of the drive and running away, I was able to breathe and know that we were fine, we weren't going to die.

Celia: Tell me about the guilt you said you've been carrying.

Albert: When you're a father and a husband there's certain things that you would expect of yourself. I can be a little bit too laid back at times but I think in that moment you realise that you have a particular role as a husband and as a father. So, it doesn't cut it to be a little bit too laid back. I felt in that moment that it was that part of me that had failed us all.

Celia: That guilt is such a huge thing. That weight of responsibility. I think I would struggle to forgive myself. How are you able to cope with that feeling of guilt or not have it weigh on you so heavily? Can you explain that?

Albert: I don't know if I can. I feel as though I've come to terms with guilt in my life, from a sense of faith and a different perspective on life and its struggles. Christ has taken my guilt from me. So, guilt doesn't stay with you in a way that cripples you anymore. Guilt in general is not something that I wake each morning concerned with feeling. God has given me something to allow my life to be less driven by feelings of guilt and more driven by the opportunity to care and love and be there for those who have lost.

The entire gospel story is a story that frees us to love and to be there and to have empathy, to listen, to acknowledge and to help people move through their pain. Sometimes we fail miserably but we still have freedom not to feel the guilt of that and to move to the next opportunity, to allow what God has done for us to be real in the world and authentic and practical. We don't have to waste our time feeling guilty about it.

Celia: Yeah, that makes sense. The day of the fires must've been one of the worst days of your life but I also know that your daughter just recently got married and that was one of the best days of your life. What was that day like?

Albert: So cool. So cool to walk her down the aisle. Yeah, far out! I mean as a parent you know your kids well enough to the point where when they get married you know them inside and out. I could just sense that she was completely ready for this and once you realise that you can let go in a joyful way. And Steven's just a real humble man of integrity who I trust with my daughter's life. We are family now.

Celia: So, you've had one of the most joyous occasions and one of the worst times of your life, only 12 months apart. What do you think about when you reflect on the contrast between those two days?

Albert: That's what life is. I mean it really is. Life is a paradox, the greatest joy and the greatest suffering all packaged into one. And because of the joy and because of what we know about all that is good, somehow we can work in all that is bad. Sometimes it becomes too much and I think God gets that. The mere fact that Jesus did come and he was born into that little manger which is the shittiest place that you could possibly imagine a story about God would begin. I think Jesus spoke that to us. We make up so much about Jesus that is just rubbish, just religious garbage. Get to the heart of what I believe Jesus was saying was "We're in this together, I come to you and I stand alongside of you and I cry with you and I live and I die with you."

You don't know what's around the corner except that around every corner you can carry the peace of God with you. Sometimes that might not feel like it's enough but it never leaves you.

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